

# COLOMBIA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. In some areas of the country, illegal armed groups, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and organized crime groups killed, kidnapped, and threatened the leaders and members of religious groups, and targeted them for extortion. These actions often disrupted the activities of religious groups working on behalf of vulnerable populations.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. embassy representatives met with the Ministry of Defense as well as with representatives of a wide range of religious groups, including Protestants, Catholics, and Mennonites, to discuss religious freedom.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 45.7 million (July 2013 estimate). The government does not keep statistics on religious affiliation, and estimates from religious leaders varied. The Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference estimates that 90 percent of the population is Catholic, while the Colombian Evangelical Council (CEDECOL) states that approximately 15 percent of the population is Protestant. According to a 2007 press report, 80 percent of the population is Catholic, 14 percent is non-Catholic Christian, 2 percent is agnostic, and the remaining 4 percent belongs to other religious groups, including Islam and Judaism. Other observers estimate that the non-Catholic population consists of five million Protestants, including evangelical, groups; 261,000 Seventh-day Adventists; 150,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons); 10,000 Muslims; and 5,000 Jews. There is also a small population of adherents to animism and various syncretic beliefs.

Some religious groups are concentrated in certain geographical regions. Most of those who blend Catholicism with elements of African animism are Afro-Colombians and reside on the Pacific coast. Most Jews reside in major cities, most Muslims on the Caribbean coast, and most adherents of indigenous animistic

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religions in remote rural areas. A small Taoist commune is located in a mountainous region of Santander Department.

### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The constitution specifically prohibits religious discrimination.

The constitution states there is no official church or religion, but adds that the state “is not atheist or agnostic, nor indifferent to Colombians’ religious sentiment.” A 1973 concordat between the Vatican and the government remains in effect, although some of its articles are unenforceable because of constitutional provisions on freedom of religion. The law prohibits any official government reference to a religious characterization of the country.

Although the constitution mandates separation of church and state, the Catholic Church retains a privileged status. Non-Catholic religious groups must gain accession to a 1997 public law agreement with the state to perform state-recognized marriages and provide chaplaincy services to military personnel, public hospital patients, and prisoners. When deciding whether to grant accession, the government considers a religious group’s total membership, its degree of acceptance within society, and other factors such as the organization’s statutes and its required behavioral norms.

The Ministry of Interior (MOI) is responsible for legally recognizing churches, religious denominations, religious federations and confederations, and associations of religious ministers, and keeps a public registry of religious entities. Entities legally recognized by the MOI can then confer legal recognition, called “extended public recognition,” to affiliated groups sharing the same beliefs. Although the application process is often lengthy, the MOI routinely grants legal recognition; the only requirements are submission of a formal request and basic organizational information. Any foreign religious group wishing to establish a presence must document recognition in its home country. The MOI may reject requests that do not comply fully with established requirements or that violate constitutional rights.

The state recognizes as legally binding only those religious marriages performed by the Catholic Church, the 13 religious groups that are signatories to the 1997 public law agreement, as well as religious groups with an associate status.

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Members of religious groups that are neither signatories to the agreement nor associates must marry in a civil ceremony for the state to recognize the marriage.

The penal code includes religious discrimination as a punishable offense, carrying penalties of one to three years in prison or a fine of 5.3 million to 8 million pesos (\$2,753-\$4,156).

A Constitutional Court ruling states that citizens may be exempt from military service if they can demonstrate a serious and permanent commitment to religious or secular principles that prohibit the use of force. Conscientious objectors who are exempted from military service are required to complete alternative, government-selected public service.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs issues visas to foreign missionaries and religious group administrators who are members of religious organizations that are legally recognized and registered with the MOI. Foreign missionaries must possess a special visa, valid for up to two years. Applicants must have either a certificate from the MOI confirming their religious group is registered with the ministry or a certificate issued by Church authorities. Alternatively, they may produce a certificate issued by a recognized religious group confirming the applicant's membership and mission in the country. They also require a letter issued by a legal representative of the religious group stating the organization accepts full financial responsibility for the expenses of the applicant and family, including return to their country of origin or last country of residence. In both cases, applicants must explain the purpose of the proposed sojourn and provide proof of economic means. The government generally permits missionaries to proselytize among the indigenous population, provided the indigenous community welcomes proselytism and visitors do not induce members of indigenous communities to adopt changes that endanger their survival on traditional lands. A Supreme Court ruling stipulates that no group may force religious conversion on members of indigenous communities.

The constitution recognizes the right of parents to choose the type of education that their children receive, including religious instruction. It also states that no student shall be forced to receive religious education in public schools. There is no religious component in the public school curriculum. Religious groups that have not acceded to the public law agreement may establish their own schools, provided they comply with Ministry of Education requirements. The Jewish community operates its own schools. A Constitutional Court ruling obligates schools to implement alternative accommodations for students based on their religion,

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following the petition of a Seventh-day Adventist university student to miss class on Saturday.

### **Government Practices**

During the year the MOI received 820 applications for legal recognition of religious entities, approved 384, and denied 152. The remaining 284 were under review or were deemed incomplete. Applicants who submitted incomplete applications or incorrect supporting documents were given 30 days to bring their applications into compliance. If the applicants failed to do so, the MOI denied the applications, allowing the applicant to refile in the future. There was no waiting period to reapply. A number of entities abandoned or withdrew their applications.

There were reports that some religious groups tried to accede to the 1997 public law agreement that enables religious groups to provide chaplaincy services and perform marriages.

Mennonite groups reported that a Mennonite divinity student was drafted into military service despite his request for exemption on conscientious objection grounds. A court rejected the student's conscientious objector claim. The student then failed to return to the military base after "home leave," and the government issued a warrant for his arrest.

### **Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations**

Guerrillas and other illegal armed groups, including organized crime groups, killed, kidnapped, and threatened leaders and members of religious groups and targeted them for extortion. These actions disrupted the human rights work of religious groups, such as advocacy on behalf of the displaced population or other vulnerable groups, or helping vulnerable groups with land claims.

The Human Rights Unit of the Prosecutor General's Office continued to investigate previous years' murders of clergy reportedly targeted as outspoken critics of terrorist organizations and illegal armed groups. The Roman Catholic Church reported that six Catholic priests were murdered and one priest was threatened. The threatened priest subsequently received protection from the National Protection Unit, a government unit that provides protection to community leaders, human rights defenders, and other citizens who have been threatened by illegal armed groups. At year's end the Prosecutor General's Office reported that

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two of the homicide cases involving priests resulted in convictions, one was at the pre-trial stage, and three were still under investigation.

Protestant leaders noted that isolation and fear of retribution in rural communities generally led to underreporting of clergy assault, harassment, and murder. Religious leaders reportedly chose not to seek government protection because of pacifist beliefs and fear of retribution by terrorist groups.

The nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Justapaz and CEDECOL continued to report threats from terrorist groups and criminal bands and forced displacement of clergy and church members associated with the Association of Caribbean Evangelical Churches in Cordoba. Member churches worked closely with communities seeking land restitution.

Other illegal armed groups, including the Rastrojos and Urabenos, also targeted religious workers.

Most religious groups reported that religious leaders refrained from publicly discussing the armed conflict between government forces and two terrorist guerrilla groups (FARC and ELN) because of threats from guerrillas and other illegal armed groups. These groups, especially the FARC, threatened, displaced, or attacked religious leaders for opposing the forced recruitment of minors, promoting human rights, assisting internally displaced persons, and discouraging coca cultivation. The Center for Research and Popular Education/Peace Program, a Jesuit NGO, also reported the Urabenos issued a statement in April that included declaring the Social Concerns Ministries of the Archdiocese of Tumaco as their enemy and permanent military target. NGOs Justapaz and CEDECOL also reported that in July the FARC circulated a pamphlet in which it prohibited the construction of Protestant and Catholic churches outside of municipal capitals and forbade religious leaders from preaching in any other churches. There were further press reports stating that as a result approximately 150 churches were forced to close in Putumayo Department since July.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

A number of faith-based and interfaith NGOs promoted religious freedom and tolerance through their programs and community engagements. Interfaith

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initiatives such as the Ecumenical Peace Forum, the Ecumenical Group of Women for Peace, and the Teusaquillo Peace Territory Project brought together a diverse cross section of religious leaders and community members to promote religious freedom and tolerance. CEDECOL advocated on behalf of conscientious objectors, documented cases of religious intolerance, and participated in various interfaith dialogues that encourage religious tolerance. The Catholic Church was the only institutional presence in many rural areas, and its Social Concerns Ministries conducted social work.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy representatives discussed with the government issues of religious freedom, such as conscientious objection to military service. Embassy representatives also maintained regular communication with representatives of the Catholic Church and other religious groups. Embassy staff routinely met with U.S. and local leaders of the Presbyterian, Mennonite, and other churches to discuss issues affecting their communities, including religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy officers reached out to these groups on official trips within the country.